

To: City Executive Board

Date: 6 April 2017

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Air Quality

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on Air Quality

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny

Executive lead member: Councillor John Tanner, A Clean Green Oxford

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the three recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Background

1. The Scrutiny Committee held a discussion on air quality at a meeting on 28 February 2017, having previously considered this topic in November 2016. The Committee would like to thank Cllr John Tanner, Board Member for A Clean Green Oxford, Martin Krafl and Stewart Wilson from Oxfordshire County Council, and Jo Colwell, Environmental Sustainability Service Manager, for attending and contributing to this discussion.

Findings and recommendations

2. The Board Member presented the report. He said the County Council was committed to introducing a zero emission zone by 2020. The City and County councils had appointed a consultant to look into practical ways to achieve this in the city centre and ideas were still being formulated. When the low emission zone was introduced buses caused the majority of the air quality problems but buses now produced lower emissions.
3. Martin Krafl from Oxfordshire County Council addressed the committee. He said the Oxford Transport Strategy 2015-2030 included plans to begin implementing a

zero emission zone by 2020. How quickly it could be rolled out would depend on what types of vehicles would be affected. Improved technology will assist the move to zero emissions. There was now 25% less traffic in the city than there was 20 years ago so progress had been made but there was still a huge amount to do. The Oxford Transport Strategy set out the priorities, which included working on creating better cycling and walking routes as well as a zero emissions zone.

4. The Committee asked how the City Council's comments on the Oxford Transport Strategy had been received by the County Council. Cllr Tanner said the County agreed with the City Council's comments. It was going to take a lot of co-operation to deal with the ongoing problems but improving air quality in the city centre would have a knock on benefits for other parts of the city.
5. The Environmental Sustainability Manager said that the City monitored air quality based on DEFRA advice. Diffusion tubes were placed in areas in the city known to have poor air quality. These were places with high levels of traffic close to residential homes and businesses. There were 75 diffusion tubes in the city which were checked every month. Data needed to be collected, analysed and audited over a 12 month period to show the long term trend of air quality at a site.
6. The Committee asked why there were so many diffusion tubes in close proximity in the city centre and why few were positioned close to the bypass. The Board Member said it was important to have lots of diffusion tubes in the city centre to monitor the situation on a number of main streets. Often two diffusion tubes were put close together to act as a control. The monitoring of different sites informed the City Council areas of concern and provided the basis of reporting on Air Quality in Oxford to DEFRA. Diffusion tubes were placed along the ring road (e.g. on the A40 near Sunderland Avenue), main traffic corridors and the city centre. There were location specific hotspots that were set out in the Annual Monitoring Report.
7. The Committee asked what specific steps could be taken to improve air quality in the worst areas, e.g. St. Clements, and whether there were plans for additional monitoring or public signage. The Board Member said he'd much prefer to focus on the causes of the problem rather than tell people how bad it was. The Environmental Sustainability Manager added that daily air quality levels were already publically available on the City Council website.
8. The Committee questioned whether as a planning authority the City Council put mitigating conditions on major planning applications approved at sites with poor air quality, such as the Westgate Shopping Centre or Northern Gateway. The Environmental Sustainability Manager confirmed after the meeting that the Council did require mitigation where air quality was forecast to be impacted by development and had secured mitigation measures and a full air quality action plan for the Westgate.

Recommendation 1 – That as part of the Local Plan review consideration is given to policies to mitigate the negative impacts of development in areas with poor air quality.

9. The Committee asked about the reason why Nitrogen Oxides (NOx) levels had risen since 2014 and whether they were attributable to a particular type of fuel. The Committee heard that all combustion engines produced NOx emissions that were harmful to human health but diesel engines produced more. The Environmental Sustainability Manager said that road works at Frideswide Square and elsewhere were thought to have contributed to some of these increases. However the long term trend was one of reducing levels on NOx. The Board Member commented that the government needed to stop offering tax incentives for diesel vehicles and incentivise electric vehicles instead.
10. The Committee noted that the City Council had the power to adopt parking zones with differentiated charges and questioned whether the Council could offer free parking for electric vehicles (e.g. up to 5 spaces). The Board Member said it would be hard to enforce differentiated parking zones in the city and that he would prefer focusing on improving air quality by tackling its primary cause.

Recommendation 2 – That consideration is given to implementing differentiated car-parking charges in order to offer cheaper parking for electric vehicles.

11. The Committee commented that they would like to see officers review the measures in the City’s Air Quality Annual Status that had not progressed and the feasibility and impact of progressing these. The Environmental Sustainability Manager advised that a review and update of actions was carried out annually as part of the Annual Status Report for DEFRA. The City Council went some way beyond its statutory responsibilities to monitor and report on air quality and had developed an array of initiatives and funding to improve air quality.

Recommendation 3 – That the feasibility and impact of measures contained in the City’s Air Quality Annual Status report that have not been progressed to date are reviewed annually.

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